

Rock stars for a day

Fort Hood Soldiers welcomed home by elementary school students

By Capt. Michael Greenberger
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Soldiers from Company C, 16th Signal Battalion, were welcomed home by students and faculty of China Spring Elementary School, just outside Waco, on Friday.

Tonya Trepinski, a literacy teacher for the school, is the sister of Sgt. Timothy Hutchings, a member of Charlie Company. Hutchings had previously visited the school to talk to students and tell them about the Army and his experiences.

When Trepinski learned her brother was going to Iraq last year, she told students and colleagues of her sibling's deployment and the school came together and decided to adopt the company and launched "Operation Iraq Heroes."

From February 2005 to February 2006, the school sent a monthly package that contained candy, snacks, movies, books, hygiene products and other items Soldiers needed but did not have the ability to get for themselves. Students also drew pictures, wrote letters and made craft projects to brighten the Soldiers' days and make them feel a little closer to home.

Teachers at the school said the experience motivated their students to do better in school and inspired them to be more like their heroes, the Soldiers.

After returning from Iraq, the Soldiers asked if they could come and thank the students and teachers who supported them over the past year. Trepinski coordinated the event, and Co. C's commander, Capt. Shannon Fortner, readily agreed to bring her company to the school.

"We wanted to take the opportunity to thank the students and teachers for all their wonderful care packages," Fortner said. "Every time we received another package from China Springs, morale would instantly pick up."

The Soldiers arrived at China Spring Elementary School to the cheers and applause of students and teachers who lined the way to the cafeteria, which was where the first of two assemblies would be held. The Soldiers took the stage in front of a massive American flag banner made up of red, white and blue hand-prints.

Awestruck students clad in red, white and blue outfits were guided by teachers into the cafeteria to be seated. The children quietly gazed toward the stage where the majority of Co. C Soldiers stood in formation. As grades K-3 were seated, fourth-graders lined the perimeter of the cafeteria.

The program began as the school's color guard, a pair of Boy Scouts, proudly posted the American and Texas flags on each side of the stage, while the Soldiers stood at attention, arms raised in salute.

Trepinski went on to introduce the Soldiers to the crowd and tell the story of how they were adopted as well as present her brother with framed photos of his previous visit to the school.

Wasting no time, Hutchings presented the school principal, Marsha Thauwald, with an American flag encased in a beautiful, wood and glass display, which also held items identifying the unit and an engraved plaque thanking the school for their support.

"This particular flag," Fortner stated, "was flown over our headquarters building in Iraq. It is a small token of our appreciation for all the great support you've given us this past year."

Before the principal could cry "Granny," one of the food preparer's at China Spring Elementary was asked to the stage to receive a certificate of appreciation for all the tasty treats she personally cooked and sent to Iraq for the Soldiers to enjoy.

The entertainment began as fourth-grader Lauren Barrett recited a



*'I got my hand signed.
This is great!'*

- Jared Carpenter, second-grader

LEFT, Sgt. Jonathan Bowman, Co. C, 16th Sig. Bn., signs an autograph for a China Spring Elementary School student. The Soldiers were treated like celebrities by the children during a welcome home ceremony held recently at the school. BELOW, Sgt. Mark Hackett, Co. C, 16th Sig. Bn. eats a barbecue lunch with a China Spring Elementary school student as part of a welcome home ceremony for the Soldiers.



Photos by Capt. Michael Greenberger, 3rd Sig. Bde. PAO

poem and helped present stones decorated with thumbprint hearts that the Soldiers could take with them anywhere they went to "have the love of the children back home."

Soon, pre-kindergarten students filed onto the stage to sing a song they'd practiced for weeks, thanking "C Company for all they do."

The fourth-graders launched into Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" as all around the room onlookers and Soldiers fought to compose themselves as the tiny voices tugged at their heartstrings.

Next, the fourth-graders tackled a jazzy rendition of "America the Beautiful," which at one point was taken over by two students who many Soldiers remarked were, "destined for American Idol."

Following the songs, adults in the crowd wiped tears from their eyes as all hands in the building came together in applause. Like rock stars, the Soldiers came down off the stage to sign autographs on children's arms, shirts, scraps of paper and anything else they could find.

"I got my hand signed. This is great!" exclaimed second-grader Jared Carpenter.

"It made me feel proud to know that people stateside were thinking about us and supporting us," Sgt. Jonathan Bowman said. Bowman went on to say, "It's a very warm feeling inside and a great feeling to know that people we don't even know support us."

The second assembly repeated the program of the first, but ended with the fourth-grade students escorting Soldiers off the stage and to their classrooms so that they could spend time getting to know their heroes.

"I actually felt very thankful because it's very gratifying to know that an entire elementary school is proud of their Soldiers and loves to support them," Spc. Glenn Orr said.

In the classrooms, Soldiers answered questions like, "Do you get yelled at a lot?" "What does Iraq look like?" and "Have you ever jumped out of a plane?" For about an hour, Soldiers answered questions and interacted with the kids, while also receiving guided tours of the school.

Lunch was to end the day as the Soldiers filed in for a meal provided by the PTA and Rusty Star BBQ. Rather than sit in the sectioned-off eating area, Soldiers chose to instead eat with the kids during their



Sgt. Timothy Hutchings, Co. C, 16th Sig. Bn., presented an American Flag that was flown over the unit's headquarters in Iraq along with a some unit patches to China Spring Elementary School principal Marsha Thauwald in appreciation of the school's support of the Soldiers throughout their deployment.

lunchtime. The children were overjoyed as Soldiers milled about looking for a place to sit.

Soon, lunchroom rules went out the window as children, no longer interested in eating, began to talk and laugh with their heroes. As lunchtime came a close and the time approached when the Soldiers of Co. C would be leaving, the urge to give crossed a line as Soldiers began tearing patches, rank insignia, and name-tapes from their DCU's to give to the children as

mementos of their visit.

Soldiers paused before leaving to snap a photo under the school name on the wall outside. "I thought it was really good that we helped them out a little," fourth-grader Tristan Cook said. "It makes me feel proud that they're still here and it makes me feel good that they're fighting for our country."

Photos of the visit are available at www.3rdsignalbrigade.org under the scrapbook.